Understanding Popular Culture: The Satyashodhak and Ganesh Mela in Maharashtra

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This paper emerges from an engagement in two projects; one a series of annual workshops on 'Conceptualising Culture' organised by the Vikas Adhyayan Kendra (VAK), Mumbai and the other a concern for developing politically engaged courses in Sociology of Culture and Gender. Courses in 'Cultural Studies' or 'Popular Culture' are mushrooming, both in the humanities and the social sciences. Most of these courses are influenced by frames in American Cultural Studies and the focus has been on popular culture presented by the mass media. This paper is not a plea for some kind of an indigenisation of these frameworks. Rather, it is an effort to draw upon some of the politically engaged interdisciplinary practices developed in Cultural Studies to do region-based social histories of popular institutions and practices. The effort is to guard against an equation of the popular to mass-mediated culture; to integrate into our pedagogical practices the social histories of complex caste and region-based popular cultural forms. Such a study of the popular, facilitates an interrogation of the structures of caste, class and gender that are constitutive of and constituted by the popular.

> 'Come to the city of contrasts, gracious Wadas (old mansions)... and neon lit shopping malls, to eleven days of village jatras, bullock – cart races, Lavani Mahatsovas (A festive gathering of the folk dancers of Maharashtra), ghazals. Motor Cross, Mushairas, food festivals, rangoli and flower shows..... a feast... to delight everyone .The Pune Festival is now the most popular public happening in Pune City'. (Brochure, Pune Festival, 1998).
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> 'Dressed in lavish costumes, sometimes in the garb of Shivaji's soldiers ... and with other paraphernalia of Hinduism practised in dancing, fencing and drill, the mela presented a colourful and ceremonious unit of the people's culture'(Times of India, 2nd Sept. 1895).

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> Ganesh Mela is 'Play(ing) a prominent role in forming and spreading a popular Maharashtrian culture of religious and caste revolt...'(quoted in Omvedt 1976:213)[1]

Each of the three events described in the texts quoted above are at three different moments in history, seen as constituting the 'popular culture of the people'. Yet, each one of these cultural practices differs so completely from the other, in its explicitly stated intent and content. In fact, it may be argued that each has to some extent incorporated, distorted, resisted and negotiated with the other. This only gives a hint of the problems associated with the conceptualisation of 'popular culture'. This paper seeks to address at least some of these problems through a study of the *Satyashodhak* and *Ganesh Melas* of the late 19th century and the early 20th century.

Interrogating the 'Popular' in Popular Culture[2]

A mapping of the trajectories of the two terms 'Popular Culture' and 'Mass Culture' would outline how the study of the 'popular' had been discovered. The study of the 'popular' was discovered in Germany around the same time as industrial capitalism was being forged and related to the ideas of nationhood. The term was used to designate the uneducated and undifferentiated sections of European Society and ideological debates centred round the possibly corrupting influence of the popular forms of entertainment (Lewis 1978). The term 'Mass Culture' came up in the 1950s to describe the culture associated with the 'lonely crowd'. Eventually, as the importance of the mass media increased not only as a major form of entertainment but also as 'Ideological State Apparatus' (Blundell et al 1993), the term became synonymous with culture transmitted by the mass media. The study of the 'popular' came to be equated with descriptions of the folkways and mores. The tensions between the cultures of the 'popular' and the 'elite', the exchanges, albeit unequal, that redefine the content of the categories even as the categories themselves are kept (Bourdieu 1984) came to be overlooked. The institutional reproduction of the 'distinctions' between the 'elite' and the 'popular' have rarely been the concern of either those studying the folkways or those celebrating the 'popular' in the 1990s.

There has been, since the last decade and a half, an unprecedented academic interest in the study of Popular Culture. The term 'popular' is in the present context of Cultural Studies synonymous with the 'mass mediated'. Interestingly, at a time when 'consumer capitalism' is being forged, the 'popular' has been again rediscovered. The study of 'popular'

culture has become central to the emergent discipline of Cultural Studies in the American Academy. The new theoretical insights in the social construction of the world of art and the equivalence of texts and privileging the audience over the creator were in part responsible for this heightened interest in the 'popular'. However, the notion of the 'popular' therein had become distanced from Williams' conception of the 'popular'. The 'popular' in a capitalist society as conceived by Williams, never exists outside the relations of domination and imperatives of commodification and yet in these relations the masses are never only passive (Mulhern 1995). This dialectical conception of the 'popular' has taken a backseat and an underlining of the elements of participation and subversion by the audiences have marked the 1980s. This is in contrast to the earlier tradition of *Kulturkritik* which had sought to defend culture from the ills of modernity, industrialisation and commercialisation. By the 1990s, subversion had been replaced by 'subversive pleasure' in the study of popular culture, so much so that studies seemed to suggest that the 'popular' as a site of contestation was outside the capitalist logic. Even the cultures of resistance of the marginalised come to be most often conceived in their mass mediated forms. For instance, for many of those doing Cultural Studies, the alternative ways in which Black women conceive the issues of mothering, abortion or health are not the nodal issues of resistance of the communities but Reggae and Rap music are. This is, of course, not to undermine the significance of these forms of music but to caution against a self-fulfilling prophecy of 'hypereality'. An earlier economic reductionism had seen culture only as a political instrument, a newly emergent cultural reductionism has now dissolved the possibility of politics. As Mulhern (1995) has commented, such a position of cultural reductionism paradoxically arrives at the same position as *Kulturkritik*. Both the positions arriving via different routes, tend to underline a complete submission to consumer capitalism. The political aspects, outside of cultural practice and political society beyond the particularities of cultural differences, come to be overlooked. Hence, as the study of the 'popular' became a viable discipline, it lost its significance as a left political enterprise. (Mcchesney 1996). The study of the 'popular' became what Mcguigan (1991) calls 'cultural populism'; the experiences of common people came to be viewed as analytically and politically more important than culture with a capital 'C'.

The earlier distinction between 'mass' and 'popular' culture was eliminated and what followed was an uncritical endorsement of popular pleasure. The postmodern turn in the study of the 'popular' and Cultural Studies had arrived as the critical tension between 'popular' and 'mass'

culture was lost in a celebration of popular cultural consumption and the spheres of production and consumption came to be conceived as if autonomous.

The arrival of Cultural Studies in India and the place of the 'popular' therein needs some deliberation. As Ghosh (1996) has underlined, the arrival of Cultural Studies, largely outside the institutional folds, holds the potential of engaging in a critique of 'naturalised ideologies, Universalist theories and of theorising fragmentary resistance' (Ghosh 1996 p.12). Cultural Studies in a post-colonial context, drawing upon post-structuralist methodologies, generated a critical examination of representations and their linkages with structures of power. However, such critiques have diverted attention away from the economic and political structures and have focused on the culture of modernity (Joseph 1998). Colonial discourse analysis is so central to doing Cultural Studies in India that it is possible to delineate the major trends in terms of their analyses of modernity. At least, three such trends can be outlined; the rejection of modernity (Nandy 1983; Chaterjee 1994), the interrogation of modernity (Niranjana et.al 1993) and the consumption of modernity (Appadurai 1997; Breckenbridge 1996)[3]. 'The rejection of modernity' school underlines the alien and dangerous nature of western modernity and the 'popular' is thus seen in terms of the pre-colonial, multiple, internal and authentic tradition and community. The pre-modern thus becomes the only possible means of resistance (Joseph 1998) and the 'popular' is assumed to be a homogeneous mass always resisting. 'The interrogation of modernity' school theorises culture as an integral part of a network of social and political relations and thus makes a significant contribution to the theorisation of the 'popular'. This school states intent as that of going beyond the 'the dominant social science frame in India which saw caste and community as embarrassing obstacles for the new nation to overcome . . . and in which culture was viewed as national culture and national identity' (Brochure of the Centre for the Study of Culture and Society, 1998). Yet much of the work of this Centre has viewed the 'popular' in terms of the mass-mediated forms, no doubt contributing to the conceptualisations in the study of cinema and art. Nevertheless, the relative silence on caste-based cultural forms or forms that contested caste is surprising, since several of these forms had contested the claims of national culture and national identity. 'The consumption of modernity' school, explicitly rejects the adjective 'popular', since it is seen as having undergone a complicated set of shifts, expansions and critiques. The term 'popular' is replaced with the notion of 'public culture'. The notion of

public is delineated from its history of civil society in Europe and is seen as constituted by cricket, tourism, food and cinema, the contestations between the state and the middle classes. Consumption is thus viewed as a modality of social life, separating the spheres of consumption and production. Those who cannot enter this world of consumption do not obviously figure in this analysis.

The present paper seeks to conceptualise the popular as those forms and practices which have roots in the social and material conditions of the dalits, bahujans and the working classes. A documentation, both historical and contemporary, of such regional and caste-based cultural practices suggests that there has been a marginalisation of these practices by bourgeois forms of art and entertainment (Srinivasan 1985; Banerjee 1989; Rege 1995). Yet following Hall (1981), it may be argued that popular practices are neither just traditions of resistance nor just forms on which the bourgeois forms are superimposed. They are at once emancipatory and imprisoning, containing and resisting and relatively more or less affected and unaffected (in different spheres) by capital. The 'popular' is appropriated by modernity and appropriates modernity, albeit unequally. To understand the popular cultural forms in history only in terms of 'folk' and as contrasting with formalism and the contemporary popular, which is understood already and always as only 'mass – mediated' is to commit both a historical and political distortion.

The approach of 'alternative modernities put forth by Bhargava[4] has important clues for conceptualising the 'popular'. He underlines the double rupture break from the pre – modern as well as from the western modernities, such that alternative modernities have no analogue either in the west or in the pre-modern. The word 'alternative' is no way suggestive of emancipatory and in fact Bhargava underlines the fact that like all modernities, alternative modernities are both emancipatory and imprisoning Any social formation is seen as having at least three layers--layers of unaffected practice, western modernity and layer of alternative modernities. Such a conceptualisation has several clues for mapping popular culture; understood as cultural practices of the *dalits, bahujans* and the working classes. There is within any given 'popular cultural practice' a layer of relatively unaffected practice (a layer of 'folk'), a layer that emerges in response to modernity and capital (a layer of appropriated folk) and a layer of re-invented alternative practices which are both emancipatory and imprisoning. The 'popular' is appropriated by modernity as also it appropriates modernity, thereby leading to re-invention of the 'popular' which is both emancipatory and imprisoning. This brings into focus the processes involved in the production of

'popular', the ways in which forms come to be produced as 'popular' at different points of time for different sections of people; this allows for the mapping of internal hierarchies within the popular cultural practices. Hence, though 'popular' as a category, persists, the focus is on the ways in which the everyday lives, labour and struggles of different castes, classes, communities and gender alter the content of this category. Hence, the 'popular', becomes a ground on which cultural and political struggles come to be worked out. With such a conceptualisation of the 'popular', we can return to the 'popular events' with which the paper began, the *Jalsa*, the Ganesha Mela and the Pune Festival. Each of these events marked as 'popular' at different periods by different groups needs to be interrogated. What are the significant moments in the discovery and re-invention of the *Jalsas* and the Ganesha Melas? How do the *Satyashodhak Jalsas* emerge as alternate popular forms distinct from the caste-based *Tamashas*? How does the Ganesha Mela in its emergence draw upon the popularity of the *Satyashodhak Jalsas* and how does its location in the public *Ganesha* festival (a re-invention of the Brahminical practice during *Peshwai*) create and reproduce class, caste and gender distinctions?

The political use of the Ganesha Melas for Hindu nationalism (Cashman 1990) and that of the *Satyashodhak Jalsa* for the non-Brahmin movement in Maharashtra (Omvedt 1976) have been well documented. Our interest here is to focus rather on these popular forms as grounds on which the category of caste is mapped, re-mapped and contested. Moreover, we also seek to outline how these contestations considerably re-invent the popular forms. To the extent that we view gender and caste as inextricably linked, the paper also seeks to outline how gender is recast on the grounds of these popular forms and to a limited extent underline the ways in which gender recasts the popular forms.

Thus, this paper seeks to present the *Satyashodhak Jalsas* and the Ganesha Melas as popular forms which in appropriating modernity presented contesting claims to the public sphere and their articulation in a national, cultural and political arena. It is possible to see, therefore, through these popular practices the varieties of alternative modernities. The paper focuses only on Pune city and historically limits itself to the 'moment of discoveries and rediscoveries of these popular forms'. The intermediate period appears in this paper only as a background.

Claiming Equality in the Public: The *Jalsa* as Popular Culture

The significance of the emergence of the Satyashodhak Samaj in 1873 and the invoking of the public festival of Ganesha in the tradition of the

Peshwas needs to be seen against the backdrop of the structures of Brahminism that had emerged in the 18th century Maharashtra and the ways in which the colonial state built upon these under the Peshwa rule. Not only had the Brahmins consolidated their economic status but with the rise of *Pandit Kavis* in the Peshwa court, a new learned religious cultural ethos had emerged in sharp distinction with the more popular devotional tradition of Bhakti. As Ganesha became the patron god of the Peshwas, the region around Pune had seen a proliferation of the *Ganapati* culture. The erasure of the *asura* (non-Brahminical) origins and association of *Ganapati* is near complete (Chattopadhyaya 1959; Thapan 1998). The cult of Ganesha becomes one of the ways in which Brahminical traditions are consolidated and the functioning of the caste system tightened. Caste contestations under *Peshwai* (Wagle 1980) were expressed largely within the structure of the Brahminical order. (Chakravarti 1998)

The continuation of a broad *Varna-Varga* (caste-class) congruence under the colonial rule formed the basis of Phule's cogent critique of the caste system. A reinterpretation of the popular beliefs, symbols and practices that had been appropriated by Brahminical hegemony was central to this critique and in fact became a basis for identity for all lower castes. Employing popular literary forms such as the *Powada* (ballad), Phule put forth an explicitly stated non-Brahminical history of Maharashtra. The non -Aryan origins of middle and lower caste peasantry, their pre-Aryan prosperity and equality and their religious deception by the *bhatshahi* (Brahmin-Aryan rule) were underlined. Parallels are drawn between mystical king Bali and Shivaji and the social category of *Kshatriya* reinterpreted as *khetriya* i.e. all those living together on land before the Brahmin invasion. The *Dashavatar* of Vishnu is reinterpreted to reveal the story of conquest and deception by the *bhatshahi* and the Hindu religious calendar is reorganised around this struggle. The unity and educational and economic mobilisation of the *Kunbi* (the peasant), the artisans (*Sali*, *Teli*) and *ati–sudras* (*Mahars*, *Mangs*) castes is sought on this very material cultural base and to this end the Satyashodhak Samaj was founded in 1873. The message of the Samaj was conveyed to the masses through folk forms such as *Powada* (ballad), *kirtan* (devotional music) and *abhangs* (verses). The Satyashodhak *Jalsa / Tamasha* was an instructional theatre of the Samaj and came into prominence only in the 1890s.

The period of 1873–90 has been noted as one in which the membership and reach of the Satyashodhak Samaj spread in and around Pune. The period of 1890–1910 is noted as of lull for the Samaj. Brahminical historiography has explained this in terms of loss of urban

base of the Samaj with the death of Phule in 1890 and its revival becoming possible only with Shahu Maharaj and the *Vedokata* controversy (the controversy over Shahu Maharaj, the ruler of Kolhapur, seeking the practice of the *Vedokata* rites for non-Brahmins). It may be argued that this period of 1890–1910 is no doubt the period in which the urban base of Satyashodhak Samaj diminished but it was also a period in which it spread to Vidarbha and Kolhapur regions. This period thus saw the consolidation of the base for the all Maharashtra conferences of the Satyashodhak Samaj that came to be organised from 1911. The Satyashodhak *Tamashas* or *Jalsa* had reached the peak of popularity during this period and were central to the consolidation of the base of the Samaj. An interesting observation about this period may be noted in the report of a Satyashodhak meeting

"..... Because of plague, cholera ,locust attack on crops and famine, for five to ten years, the old Satyashodhak leaders had to go around in order to survive. Meanwhile the traitors began their campaign and started the Ganesha Mela ..... and filled ignorant masses with artificial patriotism and a scheme to reinstate *Peshwai* (quoted in Omvedt 1976). There is thus reason to believe that the space and form of the *Jalsas* is appropriated by the Ganesha Melas.

The content of the Satyashodhak *Tamashas* or *Jalsas* was drawn from the ballads, songs, *abhangs* and poems of the Satyashodhak leaders, especially Phule and was presented in a redefined form of the *Tamasha* of the time. The *Tamasha* (folk theatre) of the period began with *gan* (a devotional offering to Ganesha) this was retained in the *Jalsa* but Ganesha was invoked as *Ganapati*, the leader of the people, and the prayer thus was an invocation of the people as a source of rule. (Omvedt 1976). The *gavlan* (a comical act central to which was an effeminate male character and which was based on a dialogue between Krishna and the milkmaids) was replaced by a dialogue between a non-Brahmin hero Satyajirao and the Brahmin women of the village (enacted by males). The *lavani / mujra* (erotic performance by the female performers) of the *Tamasha* was dropped and songs in praise of science and education and those protesting against dowry, enforced widowhood and oppression of peasantry were added in its place. The *vag* (the spontaneous theatre in the *Tamasha*) remained with themes now invariably centring on the tyranny of the *shetji–bhatji* (moneylenders and Brahmin). The *Jalsas* would often conclude with an address by the leaders of the Samaj. In redefining the form and the content, there is a significant gendering of the roles: the emancipatory and heroic non–Brahminism is represented by a male hero while the decadent oppressive Brahminism by women. Thus, not only are cross caste patriarchies and Brahminical patriarchies

made invisible but so also the revolutionary potential of non-Brahmin women.

By the 1910s, there were at least 29 Satyashodhak *Jalsas* in western Maharashtra. The organisers and performers came from lower and middle castes (*Marathas, Sonar, Nhavi, Mahar* and *Mangs*) and there seems to have been a rich textual give and take between the different *Jalsa* troupes. In Pune, at least upto 1920, the major base of the *Jalsas* was drawn from the *Mali* (gardener), *Shimpi* (tailor), *Khatik* (meat–slaughterer) and *Dhangar* (shepherd) castes. Several mass meetings of these members had been called. The struggles towards establishing mass literacy as a basis of new civic life, social and spatial mobility as a new principle, and commonality of purpose as a base of public life (Aloysius 1998) were making an impact. The *Jalsas* with their explicit critique of Brahminism had emerged as a significant mode of claiming equality in the public sphere.

It is within such a context of the 1890s that the organisation of the public Ganesha festival in 1893 and deployment of the mela (cultural troupes for conscientization) must be located.

The success of the *Jalsas* in mobilising masses had been apparent. In a period that the Samaj and *Jalsas* were at a low ebb in Pune, Tilak and his followers sought to organise a mass base for Hindu nationalism through the re-invention of the public festival of Ganesha. In explicitly stating the aims of organising such a public festival; Tilak referred to its significance not only in contesting the muslims, British reformers and the 'westernised reformers' but in a long passage in his editorial of *Kesari* of the 18th September 1894, he commented thus: 'It is important that the *Vaishyas*, the *Sali* (weaver), the *Mali* (gardener), the *Rangari* (painter), *Sutar* (carpenter), *Kumbhar* (potter), *Sonar* (goldsmith), *Vani* (trader) castes on whom the Marhatha society rests have participated in the festival. Having worked the entire day, these people often while away time chitchatting, drinking and are found in gutters and *Tamasha,* thus neglecting their families. If at least on these days–they spend their leisure in worshipping Ganesh, a lot could be achieved. Brahmins have, no doubt contributed to the subscriptions but the grandeur we must remember could be added to this public festival because of our Maratha brethern'. The anti–Muslim intent in the organisation of the festival has often overshadowed the 'caste factor'–as if the two could be completely separated. It must be underlined that several letters and debates in *Kesari* had expressed concern at the increasing participation of lower and artisan castes in the Muharram Peer and taboot gatherings and this had been seen as a danger to the grandeur of Hinduism. Thus, a pan–Hindu identity is sought to be forged; the importance of the Maratha-Brahmin

unity for economic prosperity comes to be underlined and caste oppression is displaced as 'mutual hatred and jealousies that can be overcome for the sake of pride in one's religion'(Tilak, 1894). The re-invention of Brahminism needs to be underlined here.

The public installations of Ganesha idols had been a practice with the Peshwas and their sardars (Courtwright 1985). This practice was now reorganised through apparently more secular *mandals* (committees) which were formed mainly around geographical locality, occupational / caste associations and *talims* (local gymnasiums and *akhadas*). The space for residence in Pune city was clearly marked out into caste-based quarters. Thus membership of these *mandals* came to be based on individual's caste. From the very first year of the public festival, melas were introduced as a 'mode of conscientizing the masses' during the 11 days of the festival. The melas were composed of 20 to 100 boys (mostly students) who dressed generally in the garb of Shivaji's lieutenants and sang, danced and performed disciplined drill. That the mela as a form drew upon the *Jalsa*, and yet in doing so retained its distinction as a more organised and disciplined form (higher/upper caste form) is apparent. The need of the mela 'form' is explicitly stated in caste terms as 'the *bahujans* prefer such forms over lectures and *kiritans*'(*Kesari* 1901). Almost every *mandal* had its own mela and since *mandals* themselves were caste-based, a clear-cut distinction arose between the Brahmin melas and the melas of the lower castes. The Sanmitra Samaj and the Bharat Mitra Samaj, both Brahmin *mandals attained* popularity and by claiming awards were underlined as 'superior in discipline and drilling' than the non-Brahmin melas (*Kesari* 1901). The Brahmin melas were viewed as overtly political and nationalist as against the 'religious' melas of the non-Brahmins. In the absence of adequate documentation of the non-Brahmin melas definite claims about whether 'religious' meant issues of caste oppression etc. cannot be made but can definitely be hypothesised.

The increasing Hindu nationalist fervor of the Brahmin melas, however, is obvious from the Bombay Police abstracts of the period. So much so that in 1910, the Police Commissioner's report refers to the melas as anti-government and in the same year censorship came to be imposed on all verses and scripts for the mela to be performed (Cashman 1990). This was severely opposed by the Tilak group. The censorship, however, had been diluted by the 1920s. In the Brahmin melas, like the Sanmitra Samaj mela, themes of Hindu unity, Shivaji as the protector of the cow, the Brahmin and the Hindus and Sant Ramdas as his Brahmin advisor, Home Rule and Swadeshi were common. A sharp critique of the moderate social reformers, of education for women and of the

missionaries was launched through these verses and the importance of *shuddhi* and Hinduism underlined through popular verses such as *Hamara Ram pyara hai.*

" Awake O Hindu, your religion has drowned
..... take to the walk of shuddhi,
Oh non – brahmans and marathas,
this is a special request to you too,
Curse the brahmin if you wish
But atleast reconvert one immoral one back to Hinduism
and your life's mission would complete"

A verse in a dialogical form poses the potential convert as saying:

I am going to become a Christian
for I have nothing to eat or wear,
I am my own master,
Leave me alone

The Hindu replies

if you convert
you will get a woman
as dark and distorted
as an owl,
twisted in seven places
then you be king and she the queen"
Don't blame us then !

Education for women was sharply criticised in verses such as

" There is an ethical and religious crisis,
women too now follow men,
she too prefers to learn numbers,
she can no longer draw the rangoli,
but serves it as saut that too
on the kheer,
and the rotis are burnt from below,
but never mind ! She now speaks English'.

The marching bands that performed practised drill would sing more militant verses like

" Come out of your homes,
O courageous ones of the Maharatta country,
Where are the weapons that once came out against the muslims?
Why do you not bring them out now against the gora ?
Have you lost your masculinity ?
Rise, be a true man pick up
Your weapons
And attack the enemy"

(Karandikar 1953)

These verses were generally set to tunes borrowed from the bourgeois Marathi theatre which had by then considerably displaced the *Tamasha*. (Rege 1995). To the extent that the ear is a product of history and reproduced by education, the adoption of these tunes underlined and reproduced the distinctions of classical Brahmin melas as against popular *Jalsas*. The compositions in the mela came to be legitimised in terms of taste, which becomes a marker of caste and class. In the 1930s, the songs in the mela were often set to the tunes of popular Marathi and Hindi film songs and later to the tunes of romantic Marathi songs, reproducing legitimacy through, and of, the middle class forms.

The lectures organised as a part of the *mela* were broadly categorised as religious (*Ram Bhakti* or *Rashtra Bhakti;* which one first?), social (the virtues of women); scientific (Manu or Marx), industrial (Swadeshi, cow protection), political (*Rashtra Bhakti*). In the 1920s, the colonial state appointed *mela samitis* (committees) to impose restrictions on the melas. Representation of women in these committees was granted but the same was denied to castes and Muslims. This was not a resultant of the communal conflicts or of the inclusion of girls in the melas (as training grounds for the theatre and cinema) but because of the growing conflict between the Brahmin and non-Brahmin melas.

The Emergence of the *Chhatrapati Mela*

Since 1911, the Satyashodhak conferences had gathered momentum and the urban base was once again being consolidated. Non-Brahmin politics of the period was no doubt ridden with Maratha/non-Maratha conflict and this had led to relatively greater social conservatism than the earlier

radicalism of the Satyashodhak Samaj. By 1920s, Jedhe and Javalkar had assumed leadership and mass mobolisation was once again undertaken in the Satyashodhak frame (Omvedt 1976). The non-Brahmin *tarun mandals* (youth groups) had posed a challenge to the Brahmin leadership on the Patel Bill (1918). This Bill brought by Vithalbhai Patel in the Delhi Central Assembly sought to legalise inter-caste marriages. The *Kesari* newspaper oppposed the Bill and argued that while *anuloma* marriages could be allowed, *pratiloma* marriages should be strictly forbidden . This led to heightened activity among the non-Brahmin youth groups who began to disrupt meetings in the bastion of Brahminism. In 1920, when the Pune municipal government put forth the issue of free primary education, the conservatives argued for education for boys only. The young non-Brahmin activists drove Tilak off the stage when he suggested that for the lack of funds education be made free for boys only. This brought to centre the tensions between the Brahmin and non-Brahmin melas and the controversy about the entry of 'untouchable melas' in public pandals of the Brahmins. These were the immediate grounds on which a specifically non-Brahmin form of mela, the Chhatrapati Mela emerged at the Jedhe mansion in Pune in 1922. This Chhatrapati Mela was a combination of the Satyashodhak *Jalsa* and the Ganesha Mela and was performed by uneducated troupes. These melas reached the peak of popularity by 1924 and overshadowed the popularity of the Brahmin Ganesha Melas in Pune city. One of the most famous compositions in these melas was *Naktanchya Bazar* (the market of those with the distorted noses) which critiqued the Brahmins for spending Rs 15,000 on installing a statue of Tilak. This mela potrayed the Brahmins as usurpers of social and political power in the colonial society rather than what they posed to be, leaders of nationalism. The other popular composition was *Shivaji amucha raja* (Shivaji our King) which reappropriated Shivaji from the Hindu nationalists and mapped history as a struggle between Ramdas / Shivaji, Vishnu / Bali / Tilak / Shahu Maharaj; between the Brahmin and the *bahujans*. There was considerable influence of pamphlets such as *Deshache Dushman*(enemies of the nation) published during this period and which posed Tilak as an enemy of the nation. This had led to large scale rioting and street-fights. The Brahmin melas proposed that rigorous state censorship be imposed and the *Kesari* now argued that the 'melas were to be religious not political and communal'. It was argued that the Chhatrapati Melas were unsafe for Brahmin women and that obscene references were being made to the Brahmin widows and their children. The Chhatrapati Mela organisers countered this with argument that the Brahmin melas themselves had always ridiculed educated Brahmin women. The strong polemic of

Chhatrapati Mela was influential in the Hindu Mahasabha's decision to make the public festival only a religious one. Brahmin claims to political and moral leadership were thus contested on the terrain of the Chhatrapati Mela. By the late 1920s, the 'political recruitment of ganapati' had begun to diminish .The Chhatrapati Mela as a form had thus been discovered in a direct confrontation between the non-Brahmins and Ganesha Melas of the Brahmins.

Popular Culture and Contesting Claims to the Public Sphere

In western India, in the 19th century, voluntary associations had become major modes of defining social commitment and forging of social leadership for the emergent bourgeoise. The emergence of this bourgeois public sphere, the commercialisation of leisure and new culture of organised recreation have been well underlined (Banerjee 1989). In Pune, the Sarvajanik Sabha(1871) and the Deccan Sabha had been the major modes of associational life while the Satyashodhak Samaj as a base for the unity of shudras and ati-shudras had emerged in 1873. As Masselos (1974) has noted, by the late 1880s old style public associations in Maharashtra were losing their vitality and coming to an end. It may be argued that 'popular culture', during this period, became the major terrain on which contesting claims to the public and to cultural and political nationalism were made and that a discourse on caste was central to these claims. The Ganesh Melas in fact became popular ways of naturalising the divide of social versus political for it was grounded on the assumption that difference and conflict between castes were only cultural/social and not political. In the *Jalsa* and the Chhatrapati Mela, caste as a social unit is redefined in such a way in the radical restructuring of Brahminical order that it becomes political and national. These became grounds for democratisation of civil society and emergence of masses into a public sphere; issues were more explicitly spelt out and were apparent in the Ambedkari *Jalsa* and in the Communist *Kalapathaks* of Amar Shaikh and Annabhau Sathe in the 1940s and 50s.

Recent studies on caste in colonial society have either overstated the case of caste as an invention of the 19th century colonial state (Dirks 1988) or overstated its continuities with the pre-colonial Brahminic social precepts (Bayly 1988). As O'Hanlon has argued, the relation between caste society and the colonial state constituted a profound departure from the pre-colonial era; in the pre-colonial period, the scriptural precepts, religious practices and political power had stood in tension (O'Hanlon 1997). It may be argued that the colonial state, by

relegating caste to the purely religious sphere for its Hindu subjects, had sought to de-politicise caste. This had impelled the colonised, both the Brahmins and non-Brahmins, in differential ways; the former overtly suggesting erasure of caste differences and the latter overtly suggesting bonding along differences constituted by structures of Brahmanism to promote caste identity for political organisation.

Gender, as a social effect, comes to be employed as an opposition between the Brahmin/non-Brahmin cultures, thought, speech and even particular ways of constructing and performing the texts. Consider, for example, the most popular performances in the Brahmin Ganesha Melas, which were the *kavayats* or drills. These were the grounds on which versions of Hindu masculinities and femininities were recreated and remoulded. The images of the tolerant Hindu were replaced with an obsessive preoccupation with manliness and martial heroism (Gupta 1998).

The *Jalsa* as a politically progressive version of the *Tamasha* can emerge as such only via exclusion of women performers: The Ganesha Melas seem to apparently redefine Brahmin patriarchies, by bringing upper caste women into the public as audiences for the melas but these melas were instruction grounds reinstating the 'private' as the only legitimate space for good women and this was inscribed through most of the verses. In the contestations between the Chhatrapati Melas and Ganesha Melas, gender became the major ground for the Brahmin melas justifying state censorship. The Brahmin melas complained that their women were being insulted by the Chhatrapati Melas. The Chhatrapati Melas justified their announcement of 'Beware and move away O Brahmin women – the Chhatrapati Melas have come' on the grounds that the Brahmin melas too had always ridiculed the educated Brahmin women. This recasting of gender on the interface of caste/class and communal boundaries becomes most apparent in moment of discovery or rediscovery of the popular cultural forms.

One such moment of contemporary rediscovery in the popular cultural forms associated with the public Ganesha festival is the Pune Festival. This festival is being organised jointly by a committee of politicians, Maharashtra Industrial Development Corporation and the Maharashtra Tourism and Development Corporation, since 1988 in Pune. The Pune festival includes everything ranging from golf and trekking competetions to village *Jatras* and bullock-cart races; from *lavani mahotsovs* to Usha Uthup's pop music shows and to Bharat Natyam, all in the name of revival of cultural heritage. The political recruitment for the traditional festivals seems to have been replaced by a recruitment by the culture industry. But to understand all this as just gross

commercialisation is to overlook a series of complexities; some of which can be outlined; the elucidation of which will be another project in itself. To see the Pune festival in terms of 'public culture' or as a 'sphere of consumption of the new middle classes' would amount to cultural populism. The spheres of production, the changing technologies of communication, the unintended consequences and possibilities of these need further probing into. The ways in which public festivals came to give relatively less scope for direct political propaganda or political socialisation and more for display of power of political elite needs consideration. This brings forth the questions about the culture of politics and the of politics of culture. The complex interweaving and mediations between the different forms of media, the ways in which Marathi literature, theatre and cinema through the 70s and 80s and the cassette industry of devotional music in the 1980s and 90s, have reproduced the popularity of Ganesha all need to be outlined. This re-invention is contingent on recovering the 'grandeur of Peshwa period' through the popularisation of the *Ashtavinayak* (the eight Ganesha temples considered auspicious by the Peshwa). These have led to a profitable industry of devotional regional tourism, on which the global tourism of Pune Festival is being launched. The *Hindutva* forces have underlined the continued existence of festival as an assertion of an unchanging Indian reality amidst a world that is ceaselessly changing. Hence, the importance of doing politically engaged cultural studies.

Notes

1. A commentator of the period on the Jalsas; the instructional folk theatre of the Satyashodhak tradition initiated by Phule and his followers in the second half of the nineteenth century.
2. This section draws upon my earlier paper 'Some Issues in Conceptualising Popular Culture: The Case of the *Lavani* and *Powada* in Maharashtra'. This paper was presented at a workshop organised by the VAK, at Vagamon in September 1998 and is under publication in a volume edited by Prof. K.N. Pannikar.
3. A more detailed discussion on the above mentioned three trends is attempted in Rege(forthcoming). Caste, Culture and Gender in Maharashtra.
4. This understanding of Dr. Rajeev Bhargava's conception of alternative modernities is based on my interpretation of a series of lectures delivered by him at the Department of Political Science, University of Pune in 1998. I would therefore stand to be corrected on any misrepresentation of the position or ignorance about any further revision of the position by the author.

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